



حُكْمُ التَّصْوِيرِ فِي الْإِسْلَامِ

## The Islamic Ruling on Picture Making

An Abridged Section from Shaykh Muhammad ibn Sālih al-Uthaymeen's Work *ash-Sharh al-Mumti' 'alā Zād al-Mustaqni'*



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## حُكْمُ التَّصْوِيرِ فِي الْإِسْلَامِ

# The Islamic Ruling on Picture Making

**An Abridged Section from Shaykh Muhammad ibn Sālih al-Uthaymeen’s Work *ash-Sharh al-Mumti’ ‘alā Zād al-Mustaqni’***

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Picture making is forbidden, and it is of three types:

**The first type** is to capture images of things that are manufactured, and this type is permissible. For example, someone makes an image of a car. So when you see it, you say, “This is an exact replica.” We say that this type of image capturing is permissible because it originates from a thing manufactured by man. So if the origin of a thing is permissible, then it stands to reason that images of such things are likewise.

**The second type** consists of images of living things that are soulless and nonsentient<sup>1</sup> but are things created by Allah, such as trees, plants and many other things. The majority of the people of knowledge say that it is permissible to capture images of such things. However, Mujāhid [ibn Jabr] states that it is forbidden for anyone to make images of trees and anything else that has a life form but is nonsentient.

**The third type** is to capture images of things that are sentient, such as humans, camels, cattle and rabbits. The Salaf differed with regard to this type of imagery. Some of them said that picture making of such beings is forbidden if it is three-dimensional, in the sense that it is a

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<sup>1</sup> having the power of sense perception or sensation; conscious

statute of a human or animal. If, however, it is not three-dimensional (has a human or animal form) then it is permissible.

The majority of scholars make no distinction between three-dimensional images and drawings and state, and this is the correct view, that both are forbidden. Images that are captured by hand are no different from three-dimensional images. Rather, it is a type of major sin, based on the hadeeth of Ali ibn Abī Tālib (رضي الله عنه) who said to Abul Hiyāj al-Asadī, “Shall I not send you on the same mission as Allah’s Messenger (صلى الله عليه وسلم) sent me? Do not leave an image without erasing it or a high grave without levelling it.” It would seem that this narration is in reference to paintings/drawings and not statues because if it were referring to statues, it would have used terminology such as, “do not leave an image without smashing it”.

In contemporary times, portraits, unfortunately, have become a studied art for which people are lauded and praised. So when a person does a portrait of a cow, camel or person, its admirers say, “Look at how skilful and precise he is!” There is no doubt that this type of approval is connected to a major sin and a direct violation of the Messenger’s (صلى الله عليه وسلم) statement. “Allah said, **‘Who is more unjust than he who tries to create something like My creation?’**” In other words, ‘There is nothing more unjust than self-association with Allah in the act of creativity.’ This is an unjust act and an audacious move against Allah, the Mighty and Majestic. You want to compare yourself with Allah when you are a creature and He is your Creator?! Then Allah puts forth a challenge and states, **“I challenge him to create even a smallest ant, a wheat or barley grain.”** So Allah sets a dual challenge: (1) to create something that contains a soul, and it is the smallest of creations, namely an ant, and (2) to create something soulless, namely a wheat grain. And even if the whole of mankind endeavoured together until the Last Day, they would not be able to create either of the two.

Perhaps someone might say, “We now have artificial rice that looks like real rice, so is it forbidden to replicate it? We would say that this is not like real rice because if you placed it in the earth and poured water on it day and night, it would not germinate. However, what does germinate is the creation of Allah:

﴿إِنَّ اللَّهَ فَالِقُ الْحَبَّ وَالنَّوْعَ﴾  
٩٥

**Surely, Allah causes the grain and the stone to germinate.**

In summary, images are forbidden whether they are three-dimensional or paintings/drawings. Moreover, it is from the major sins, and the one who perpetrates this sin just once has deviated from justice and remains an evildoer until he repents.

As for all modern methods of capturing images, then they are of two types:

**The first type** includes things that have no tangible substance [and can only be seen by processing them through a machine], as I was told is the case with images on video tapes. There is no ruling at all concerning this type of imagery, and they are not sectioned under things that are categorically forbidden. This is why the scholars who forbid images produced on paper (i.e. photograph)<sup>2</sup> state that there is nothing wrong with this. This led them to ask if it were permissible to video record lectures that are delivered in the masjids. They concluded that it should be avoided because it could disturb the people who are praying and inappropriate things could be filmed and so on.

**The second type** are images that are developed on paper and this takes place via photography. This type of image capturing does not enter under the forbidden type, and therefore it is not possible for a person to state that the person who takes these sort of pictures is cursed because he has not made an image per se. The word **التصوير** is the verbal noun (gerund) for the verb **صَوَرَ** – **يُصَوِّرُ**, and this means ‘to render a thing in the form of something specific’. For instance, Allah states,

وَصَوَرَكُمْ فَأَحَسَنَ صُورَكُمْ

3. And He formed you, then made goodly your forms.

[At Taghaabun 3]

So this matter requires that there be human intervention in the process of making the picture because the verb pattern **فَعَلَ** linguistically necessitates this involvement. It is well known that the process of imagery via this instrument does not include this phase (i.e. human intervention). And if it does not include this phase then we cannot include him amongst those who were cursed by

<sup>2</sup> A photograph or photo is an image created by light falling on a light-sensitive surface.



Allah's Messenger ﷺ. A distinction of sorts is required to be made between (1) someone who takes a book I have written by hand and then places it in a photocopier, operates the machine and out pops a copy and (2) between my attempts at copying your writing by hand. Now I have attempted to replicate your work by writing and lettering what you have written. In the first scenario, there is no actual deed on my behalf (i.e. photocopying), since I can take pictures/photocopy at night; a person with his eyes shut can take pictures. Even a blind man can take pictures, so how can we label this person as a picture maker?! The way I see it is that this type of image capturing does not fall under the type required by the verb صَوَرَ, and therefore it does not warrant the charge of cursed.

However, something remains to be taken into consideration: if a person wishes to take these sort of permissible images then the procedure is that it is subject to the five rulings which are based on intention. So if he has designs to do something forbidden with these images then it is prohibited. If he intends to use these images to fulfil an obligation then the means itself is an obligation. Therefore, images are sometimes a legal requirement. If, for example, we witness a man perpetrating a crime which results in a human-rights violation, like attempted murder, and the only way we can prove the crime is by taking pictures, then in this case, taking pictures becomes an obligation, especially when these pictures may be the deciding factor in proving a case. But if we take these pictures just for viewing pleasure then this is undoubtedly forbidden, like pictures for memories (photographs).

**The first type** is to use it for venerating and glorifying things. These types of images are forbidden, whether they be in the form statues or portraits. There is no difference if these images are used for purposes of glorifying the ruling elite (government propaganda); to venerate an idol knowledge, kinship or comradeship or any other form of veneration. Whatever the type of veneration being done, it is forbidden; in fact, it is not even [true] veneration. For example, a person having portraits done of his father when he is alive is not [true] veneration; true veneration is to honour him in word and deed when he is alive. If his father is deceased then he will not profit from this sort of veneration (portraits). Rather, this is just a way to accumulate sins and to revive latent sadness and grief. Therefore, the one who has these types of pictures is duty-bound to tear them up or burn them. It is impermissible to keep such pictures because they are hazardous for two reasons:

1. They prevent the angels from entering the home.

2. Through these types of venerating and glorifying, the devil can wield his influence over man, so much so that it seizes control of the heart and holds sway over it, especially when the venerating is related to knowledge and worship. Truly, the trial and tribulation of the people of Nūh came in the form of statues and monuments.

**The second type** is that he takes images in order to degrade them by turning them into beds, chairs or pillows. With regard to this type, there is a difference of opinion. The majority of the people of knowledge state that this is permissible because the Prophet (صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ) himself took a picture which had an image on it. Moreover, this is opposite to the reason why pictures were forbidden to begin with because this entails degrading images [as opposed to elevating them].

Some scholars hold the view that it is forbidden. They use as evidence the hadeeth of the Prophet (صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ) when he came home one day and he saw a pillow with pictures on it. So he stood at the door but did not enter. So Aa'isha (رضي الله عنها) said that she noticed a sign of displeasure on his face, so she said, "I repent to Allah and His Messenger. What sin have I done?" He (صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ) said, "The makers of these pictures will be punished on the Day of Resurrection and it will be said to them, 'Give life to what you have created.'" So the scholars stated that we forbid these images because the Prophet (صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ) loathed them and stated, "The angels do not enter a house wherein there are pictures." So when it was said that he took a cushion with a picture on it, they took this to mean that the head of the picture had been removed. So if the head of the picture is removed then such pictures are permissible.

Abstaining from doing this is undoubtedly the more prudent approach and closer to piety, so therefore do not use any pictures even if it is for purposes of degrading such images by turning them into cushions etc.

**The third type** is that he neither uses them for aggrandisement nor for degrading. The majority of the scholars hold the view that images used for this purpose are forbidden. We have some reports from the Salaf regarding the permissibility of images that come in picture form. It is even reported that some of the Salaf had animal pictures on their curtains. However, those who did this from the Salaf, like Qāsim ibn Muhammad, their actions are excused on the basis of interpretation, and therefore we do not argue a case based on their actions because the evidence

is whatever and Allah and His Messenger (صل الله عليه وسلم) have said. It could be the case that the evidences did not reach them or some other excusable reason.

## TWO IMPORTANT MATTERS

**The first matter** is that how much of a general necessity these pictures have become nowadays in the sense that they are everywhere. We find these pictures on packaging for food and drink, tins, books and magazines. These pictures are everywhere except for places where Allah has willed them not to exist.

We say that if a person purchases anything for the reason that it contains pictures, then undoubtedly this commodity is prohibited. What I mean here is that if we saw a forbidden picture in some magazine or newspaper, and this picture had such an impression on us that it became the very reason why we purchased it, then this is undoubtedly prohibited. If, however, we purchased something for knowledge or learning purposes, I would like to think that this is a non-issue, in consideration of trying to ease hardship or difficulty. Allah, the Most High, states,

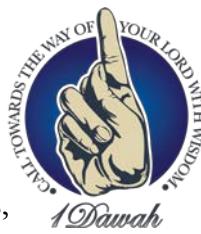
وَمَا جَعَلَ عَلَيْكُمْ فِي الدِّينِ مِنْ حَرَجٍ

And [He] has not placed upon you in the religion any difficulty.  
[Al Hajj 78]

However, let us assume that a person lives with some of his family members and he fears that these pictures might lead to temptation because they are pictures of men who are considered beautiful and handsome, then in such a scenario, it is impermissible to have such magazines in the house.

**The second matter** is pertaining to images which children play with. These types of images are of two types:

1. Tangible images made up of rags and cotton wool, free from any prominent features. There is no harm in these toys whatsoever because Aa'isha (رضي الله عنها) used to play with dolls in the time of the Prophet and he did not censure her.



2. Tangible images that are made out of plastic and is a miniature model of humans, which can even move or speak. Someone could argue that these types of toys are prohibited because it is a spitting image of a human and it even speaks and moves like one. Someone else could argue that these toys are permissible because Aa'isha (رضي الله عنها) used to play with dolls and the Prophet (صل الله عليه وسلم) never censured her. The first person could retort by saying that the dolls we have now are not like the dolls in the time of Aa'isha; there is a massive difference between the two. When someone looks into the general principle of legal concessions, you will see something approved for children that is not approved for adults. This is something that Shaykh al-Islam [Ibn Taymiyyah] mentioned when speaking on toys. He said, "Some things can be approved for kids which are not approved for adults."<sup>3</sup> He said this because it is part of a child's nature to play. So you will find these dolls, which look like real girls, in the hands of little girls, treating them as if they gave birth to them. It could even play an instrumental part in how she raises her children in the future. You find her naming this doll one name and another doll another. So it could be argued that this is legally approved for her, and as result I refrain from saying that it is forbidden. However, there is one way of ridding ourselves of this doubt, and it is to erase the face of the doll.

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<sup>3</sup> *Majmoo' al-Fatāwā* (30/216).